

Victors in Blue: How Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the Civil War

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Review

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Castel, Albert and Simpson, Brooks D. *Victors in Blue: How Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the Civil War.* University Press of Kansas, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-7006-1793-7

Assessment of Union Leadership

Albert Castel is best-known for two interpretations: his critical evaluation of Sherman and the conduct of the Atlanta campaign, and his revisionist assessment of Vicksburg, which other historians commonly label a turning point. While *Victors in Blue* is critical of U.S. generalship, its value lies much more in its presentation of the principal military operations of the war in a single volume. As one often fears when reading "how so and so did amazing things and saved western civilization" titles, there turns out to be less explicit analysis than one might hope for. On the other hand, *How the North Won*, by Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, is twice as long (with much more explicit analysis); Russell Weigley's *A Great Civil War* is deeply flawed in numerous ways; and most other competitors are far too summary. Castel's writing sparkles; despite limited attention to the Confederates, or to operations in the east in 1862, *Victors in Blue* is probably the most balanced single-volume treatment of U.S. military operations over the course of the war.

Most of *Victors in Blue* is a narrative of *How Union Generals Fought the Confederates* [and] *Battled Each Other*. Castel identifies Lee as the best general of the war, but also the only Confederate really capable of command above the corps level. The majority of the story is about the rise of effective U.S. commanders, more specifically, and rightly, the U.S. Grant story, often through maneuvering to secure recognition or gain new commands. The result is necessarily western-oriented, with little but scorn for the generals of the Army of the Potomac prior to Gettysburg. Castel repeats his past arguments against the decisiveness of Vicksburg--essentially that the Confederacy was not actually drawing much from the Trans-Mississippi--with which I agree. His most

sustained revisionist argument is in favor of William Rosecrans, victim of chance, contingency, the errors of others, and most important Grant's enmity. Castel believes that Rosecrans was Grant's only equal, and observes that he would write a biography if he were younger. It is unfortunate that he will not do so, since Rosecrans has been sorely underserved by Civil War historians.

Castel's prologue advises readers "to be prepared for some surprises--even, mayhap, some shocks," so this review is ultimately about revisionism in Civil War scholarship (10). The dominant themes in *Victors in Blue* are contingency, chance, and even irony. In this way Castel avoids potential charges that he attributes too much agency to the generals, but doing so also limits any effort to identify patterns across campaigns, or patterns in the rise of effective U.S. commanders. *Victors in Blue* does not have the thematic suggestiveness and consistency of *How the North Won*, or of Brian Holden Reid's *The Civil War: The Operational Battlefield*. In terms of larger historiographical questions, Castel provides as many examples as one could like of contingency and chance on campaign and the battlefield and of the intervention of political factors small and large. However, apart from the statement that Missionary Ridge was the only major battle won exclusively by frontal assault--a point rarely made so explicitly--he does not address the question of decisiveness in battle in much detail, or the question of how the war was to be won if battle was not an effective means to that end. Thus, despite Brooks Simpson's presence as a co-author of sorts (his role is not quite made clear), Grant's Overland Campaign and the siege of Petersburg appear as processes of trial and error driven by Grant's determination, with little positive evaluation--hardly the revisionist perspective Castel promises in his prologue. More persuasive interpretations can be found in Earl Hess's *In the Trenches at Petersburg* (reviewed by this author three years ago in *Civil War Book Review*), or *The South vs. the South* by William Freehling, in which Grant's unusual ability and willingness to maneuver become strategies for pinning the Army of Northern Virginia in place, denying it freedom of action to enable attrition to take its fatal toll.

Two further issues, often presented as ways the Confederacy could have maintained its independence, merit attention. The first is the shibboleth of diplomatic recognition: Castel asserts that the United States would have "no option except to declare war" on Britain if Britain recognized the Confederacy (97). This is absurd. For some inexplicable reason generations of Civil War historians have confused recognition with military intervention. Recognition does not require or imply aid of any sort. Nor would recognition permit Britain

to trade freely with the Confederacy. Despite the Declaration of Paris in 1856, which outlawed privateering as well as ineffective or "paper" blockades (but which had not been ratified by the United States), Britain had a vested interest in accepting a U.S. blockade, since the U.S. had protested British blockades between 1793 and 1815. Even under the Declaration, belligerents (the United States) could still seize "contraband of war" from neutral (British) vessels.

The question of recognition seems to be a lot like that of secession: some historians (I do not mean Castel) search for "legal" bases as magic causal bullets, enabling Confederate victory. These are counterfactual fantasies. Both secession and recognition were political questions, in which the majority, of people or power, ruled (or rather, ruled them out). As long as the United States avoided a second *Trent* incident, there was virtually no way Britain was going to fight the United States, its largest trade partner and the world's second largest navy, for Confederate cotton, for the marginal southern import market (probably less than a tenth that of the North), or to divide and contain the United States. Let me repeat that--no way.

Nor does Castel critically examine the question of Atlanta and the 1864 election. I think military historians are far too quick to accept Lincoln's pessimism about his chances without looking more deeply at the political dynamics of the election. While the Republican Party was still relatively new, partisan loyalties ran very deep; if nothing else, historians should identify the swing states that would win the 1864 election for the Democrats. New York and Indiana alone were not going to do so, nor were smaller Democratic states like Delaware, Connecticut, and New Jersey. The Democrats had to win at least one of Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Illinois. Ohio and Illinois were certainly not going to swing. This is a case in which military historians overstate contingency. To a military historian, the relationship between military and political victory and defeat may appear obvious. But in fact, we have little evidence in American history of sluggish military performance leading to political defeat. In part that is an artifact of timing: only 1864, 1952, 1968, and 1972 present us with applicable cases, and one could say that Truman and Nixon had accomplished their objectives. But does anyone believe that FDR would have lost the 1944 election if the Allies remained stuck in Normandy?

Even without taking Richmond or Atlanta, U.S. forces had cleared the Mississippi, dominated the West, and driven Lee into Petersburg, from which he showed no signs of emerging, by July 1864. However misconceived their hope

for a single decisive victory, I do not believe that the northern electorate needed the fall of Atlanta to see that the United States was advancing toward victory. Nor was Republican electoral strength based on military success: it was based on a mix of anti-slavery and Whiggish government support for economic development, plus a bit of anti-Catholicism and anti-immigrant prejudice (which grew after the war, but was less significant in 1860 than in 1856). Historians have to balance their use of primary source evidence with their hindsight; hindsight suggests that partisan loyalties were too deeply entrenched for a Democratic victory in 1864, especially in an election fought in the northern states where Lincoln had gained approximately 60 percent of the vote in 1860. Those who find this hindsight too abstract or anachronistic should recognize that we need political studies as detailed as the military ones, lest we assume that the appearance of insufficient military progress (not actual defeat) could overcome the partisan strength that was based largely on non-military factors.

Because Castel's analysis is so closely tied to his narrative, *Victors in Blue* is much less about strategy than about operations and the politics of command. In the end, it seems that Castel wanted to raise Rosecrans onto Grant's pedestal, but realized that the evidence does not permit him to dethrone Grant. Castel recognizes Grant's dilemmas in handling the generals of the Army of the Potomac while facing his only Confederate equal, but his narrative presents a significant contrast between the Grant of 1862 and 1863 and that of 1864 and 1865, without clearly explaining the difference--if difference there was. More explicit analysis is necessary to provide the shocks and surprises--the new insights--Castel promises.

Samuel Watson is an associate professor of history at the United States Military Academy, where he teaches the history of military strategy and operations and senior thesis seminars on the nineteenth-century army and the Civil War. He edited Warfare in the United States, 1784-1861 (2005); his book Jackson's Sword: The U.S. Army Officer Corps on the Frontier, 1810-1821 will be published by the University Press of Kansas in December 2012.